

Over the last year I have been asked to take on some responsibilities around ordination within our association of churches. It's one way that the denomination partners with churches, and as churches seek to ordain their pastors, they turn to the denomination for help in equipping and preparing the ordinands for appearance before and Ordination Examining Council. We discuss matters such as gifting, theology, philosophy of ministry, and pastoral calling. It is a privilege to hear pastors share their stories and theology, to guide them on some areas that may require more thought, and to hear about their calling to ministry. Interestingly, most of our pastors come to us from other denominations and faith traditions, and often our pastors are not raised here in Canada.

When we talk about pastoral calling amongst these pastors, we usually discuss internal and external calling. The reason for this is quite simple; you may think you'd be a great pastor, you believe you've heard from God on the matter, but it turns out that nobody else shares your opinion. And so we probe to see confirmation of calling from other sources; maybe the pastor of your home church, a mentor, a friend, and so forth. It's important to confirm these things, frankly, because some days will be difficult enough in ministry that one may well want to quit and leave faith altogether. It's in those moments that calling, and affirmation of calling, really carry weight. Calling for ministry is a serious thing, and I've heard lots of people describe their callings, but even so, if Moses had shared his story of calling at the Ordination Examining Council, I still would have been on the edge of my seat. It's not often you hear of burning bush stories, and in the midst of that miracle, the audacity of a person to offer an array of objections.

### **Moses: Hebrew or Egyptian?**

I wish to make some observations about Moses and this story before we get to chapter 3. If we take a 10,000-foot view of the narrative, we see some themes that are at the infancy stage of their development. This story starts in Egypt, where the rulers are seen as having other worldly power, and so the story will eventually be about who the real sovereign is, about moving from one master to another (Longman, *How to Read Exodus*, p. 48. The pharaohs are essentially gods, the embodiment of divinity (Provan in *Sources of the Christian Self*, p. 23), the control centre of the nation, the defender of the nation, and they are hierarchical. Moses as a Hebrew infant was brought into the palace of one such ruler, and so he had all the resources of Egypt at his fingertips. He would have known high culture in his setting, and he would have been privy to high end education and opportunity. As a result, at the beginning of story at least, we could probably safely conclude that Moses was in some ways more Egyptian than Hebrew. His upbringing had not been slavery; it had been Egyptian privilege.

Yet with all that adopted pedigree, we still see that Moses had something different about him. We see that he was one who was not afraid to side with the oppressed, and that he was a

compassionate man. In fact, he went so far as to kill an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew slave, which seems a little overzealous, but you get the point. We also see this compassionate impulse near the end of chapter 2 in Exodus. Moses rescues the daughters of the priest of Midian from the shepherds who were mistreating them. Again, Moses stood up for the oppressed, and this led him to come to the house of Jethro, and eventually marry one of Jethro's daughters, name Zipporah. (Provan, p. 25-6).

In addition to Moses' entitled upbringing and his compassionate heart, we also see near the end of chapter 2 that there was a larger narrative at play. God had heard the plight of the Israelites and was responding to it. God had made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and though it looked like this group of people was down for the count, God knew from seeing their plight that it was time to act. The story of Moses continues to the end of Deuteronomy, yet we must remember that the events described in the Torah are the result of God remembering his covenant.

And so we come to our passage starting at chapter 3. Moses is shepherding some flocks, and he notices something unusual; a bush that is on fire yet is not consumed. The imagery is important; "Any other fire needs to consume fuel. It can only continue to blaze while there is stuff it can consume. Then it goes out. But the fire in the bush is self-sustaining. It needs no fuel. It blazes as it chooses. Similarly, God is self-subsistent and self-determining." (Bauckham, Who is God, p. 42). Additionally, Moses has to take off his sandals as he approaches, and God instructs him to do so because the ground is holy. The notion of holiness turns out to be a major theme for the rest of the Old Testament and especially in the Pentateuch, but here we get the start of what that means.

### **OBJECTION 1 – Who am I to appear before Pharaoh?**

Verses 7-10 describe God as having heard the cries of his people, and his willingness to act. In re-reading these verses, I was kind of struck by how vague these instructions are. Essentially, God says, "I'm going to rescue my people from the Egyptians, get them to the land of milk and honey, and Moses, this all starts by me sending you to Pharaoh." It's a bit like being sent to the grocery store without a list, and so I can see why Moses pumps the brakes on the conversation. In fact, he will do so 5 times, but at chapter 3:11 we see his first objection: "Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?" I imagine he was having a bit of an identity crisis, actually; his connections in the Egyptian household were past, and he did not have a shared experience of slavery with the people of Israel. In fact, he describes the people of Israel at arm's length in verse 11, certainly not suggesting that he was part of them.

Apparently God wasn't too worried about the perceived limitations. He responds to Moses by assuring him of his presence for the enormous task at hand. His presence would result in

the people of Israel coming back to the very mountain Moses was standing on to worship God. As incredible as that possibility was, Moses wasn't letting that sink in just yet.

## **OBJECTION 2 – What shall I tell the people of Israel if they ask for your name?**

We see Moses' continued reticence as offers another objection, as seen at verse 13. What shall I tell them if they ask your name? We must remember the background here to help us understand the significance of the exchange that followed. Certainly the people of Israel had remembered the promises God made to their ancestors. Yet in Egypt, gods were named, so that people summon that god for whatever they needed. If you need the god of rain, you call on that god to help out. In a sense, "to know a god's name was to have some power to make the god respond (Bauckham, p. 40)." So Moses figured that if God was really going to help the Israelites, they needed a name with which to call on him.

The problem, of course, is that God doesn't really offer a name back to Moses. He doesn't offer Ra or Zeus, for instance. Instead, He says, "I am who I Am." As one author writes, this means that this God can not be constrained, even in name, and only by Himself. But as we read a little further in the narrative, it also means that this God is remembering and committing Himself to a course of action for Israel's sake. The self-determining One determines himself to be Israel's Savior, the One who is sending Moses to deliver the people. (Bauckham, p. 42)

In verses 16 and following we find some of the details that were omitted earlier on, as God is now more specific in terms of what lies ahead for Moses. Perhaps Moses was now wishing he *hadn't asked* for further details, because the way forward included going to talk to the elders of the people of Israel, and then going to king of Egypt. On top of that, there was not going to be immediate success, as the king of Egypt was not going to just hand the people over. It would take mighty acts of God, and God was prepared to follow through on them. Eventually they would be able to leave, and the Egyptians would look favorably upon them as they left.

## **OBJECTION 3 What if they don't believe me?**

Well, even after all this, we see at the beginning of chapter 4 that Moses still wasn't fully on board with the plan. His next objection was about whether or not he would be believed, and as we read further into the story, we recognize that here he has the Egyptians in mind. It's all good that the people of Israel would believe him, but what was he going to do if the Egyptians did not? And so God enables him to demonstrate three acts of power, acts that would have been familiar to those that were versed in Egyptian magical arts (Provan, p. 30).

The first act of power involves Moses' shepherd's staff, which would become very significant in Moses' ministry. Certainly the miracle was required to turn the staff into a snake, but the point of turning it into a snake was so that the people might believe that the God behind the miracle had power over creatures and creation, perhaps a foretaste of the plagues to come. To further this miraculous sign, the Lord tells Moses to grab the snake by its tail. Now I'm no snake handler, but even I know that you should probably grab a snake by the neck if you want less trouble. Moses, an act of faith, throws the staff on the ground and everything goes as the Lord had told him. Surely this must've been the start of reassurance for Moses.

The Lord doesn't stop there. He immediately talks about a second act of power, so that the people will believe that the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob actually appeared to Moses. God instructs him to put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it back out it was covered with a severe skin disease. His skin was white, which was a sure sign that this was a serious ailment. Thankfully, when he repeated that gesture, his hand was completely cured. This too was a demonstration of power, again a foretaste of some of the trouble coming.

There was a third sign, and this too was foreshadowing of a plague to come. The water from the Nile River was to turn into blood on the ground. There are at least two points to think about here, the first being that God understood that the Nile had in fact flowed with the blood of innocent Hebrew children (Kaiser, *The Expositor's Commentary*, p. 326). He had indeed seen their plight and had witnessed the carnage orchestrated by the Pharaoh. This would not go unnoticed, as the Lord so powerfully reminded the Hebrew people. And importantly, the Nile was worshiped by the Egyptians as a god. Here God was showing a sign that the Egyptian gods were to be dominated by him. It's a very significant and powerful sign for the Hebrew people.

#### **Objection 4 – I'm not very good with words.**

This is obviously very powerful stuff, yet Moses isn't all that ready to sign up. I imagine he's experiencing that sinking feeling that this is too big for him. Whatever the motivation, he's got another excuse for God, with the hopes that this will somehow change God's mind about him. Moses suggests that he's not very good with words, that he gets tongue-tied, and that words for him become tangled. We must remember that Moses would be communicating in Hebrew as well as Egyptian. This was no small task to be fluent in both of those languages. And so he spoke with a slow mouth, and a heavy tongue, or so he thought.

The Lord listens to Moses, but gives Moses a response that reminds us a little bit of God's response to Job. In the book of Job, the Lord replies to Job's complaints by asking where he was exactly when the Lord was busy creating the earth and the galaxies. In other

words, God is reminding Moses that he knew full well how the mouth works since he was in fact creator. He hadn't forgotten the recipe to speak, and he reminds Moses that he's got this under control and that he will instruct Moses with what to say.

**Objection 5 Lord, please! Send anyone else.** While it appears that Moses was about at the end of his "what-if" game with the Lord by the time verse 13 comes around, by now Moses knows that he's cornered, and whatever objection he raises will certainly have a rebuttal. So he throws all caution to the wind and he says to the Lord, "Come on, Send somebody else already, anybody else. Surely if you are God, you can find somebody else for this task," seems to be Moses reasoning, and undoubtedly there was some truth to his statement. By now the Lord is perturbed, angry with Moses, but does not direct any harm towards him. Instead he accommodates him and enlists Aaron to be a helper for Moses. In fact, he is going to be Moses's mouthpiece, as Moses would relay God's words to Aaron to speak to the Hebrew people. Throughout the rest of the narrative, there isn't much evidence that Aaron would in fact do this very often for Moses. Maybe Moses got more experience along the way or perhaps his speech wasn't as poor as he thought. In any event, the Lord accommodated Moses but also equipped him for the task at hand, bringing an end to his excuses.

---

Page | 5

By the end of verse 17 it seems as though Moses has finally been satisfied, or he finally acquiesces, and he decides to head back home. Interestingly, God reminds Moses to not forget his staff as he returns home. If you read further into this narrative, you would see the staff show up at some pretty important events; the crossing of the Red sea comes to mind. These days we'd put that staff in some sort of hall of fame, but for Moses that staff would be an aid in God's magnificent covenant keeping, and maybe, just a maybe, a reminder of where Moses had come from.

### **Conclusion:**

What we are we to glean from this passage for our lives today? I mean, I understand that your congregation is already situated in the land of milk and honey, and so perhaps we should simply enjoy the story and carry on.

Yet I think there are a couple of items that we might consider as we reflect on this calling of Moses. is rather specialized. First, the text really reminds us of the struggle to receive a calling from God. One commentator suggests that what we have in Moses' objections are a mix of humility, an appreciation for the difficulties that lie ahead, and plain old stubbornness (Enns, Exodus, p. 114). In Moses' case, this is kind of a long drawn out event and he uses every excuse he can muster to actually shy away from the call. Perhaps here the text speaks to us most directly; perhaps we have knowingly received promptings from the spirit of God, and we have established excuses and roadblocks so as to not respond obediently to those promptings. Now isn't the time, we say. I can't serve the

church because.... I won't respond to the call of baptism because..... I won't reveal my faith to my fellow workers because..... I can't have a philosophical discussion with my atheist friend for fear of.... I can't invite my friend to youth group because... You get the picture. At the most basic level God calls each of us to follow. And yet God also continues to call us towards him in obedience in smaller, bite sized ways. Shall we continue to put up excuses?

And second, let's not lose sight of the bigger picture from this narrative. Simply put, God remembers his covenant, his people, and He knows when it's time to act. In this world, and in our lives, it is easy to get discouraged, to think that God has wound things up like a clockmaker and is just letting things unwind, only to move on to an extended lunch break. This narrative reminds us that this is not the case. God's timing is not ours, to be sure, and apparently He's not as efficient and calendar driven as we'd like Him to be. But He remembers, and He knows when it's time to act.

I close with a personal story whereby the notion of God remembering was liberating for me. My mother passed away in 2016, and she had suffered from a variety of health matters, including Parkinson's induced dementia. By the last of her days, she did not even recognize her family, and you can imagine it was difficult to witness. One of my brothers suggested we read a book together on dementia, by John Swinton. It's a dense book, with tough slugging, and ironically I don't remember much of it. But it was so encouraging for me, because of some of the things I was thinking at the time. In our expressions of faith, sometimes we emphasize our abilities to respond to God too much. We are too Arminian theologically, and maybe especially in terms of salvation. Practically, what if, by the time you die, you can't remember if you said yes to Jesus? What if your mom, who read her Bible nearly every day when she could, no longer had capacity or interest to do so?

Here's what made that book worth the read. As I was thinking about my mom's life, and her deterioration, I read this line from that dense book: *Importantly, God is the One who remembers*. I have clung to that, not only for my mom's life, but for a whole whack of other stuff too. I hope God's ability to remember, and to act, is an encouragement for you as well, in small ways, but in cosmic, salvation-type ways as well. Amen